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The Canada Council  
Conseil des Arts du Canada

Culture and Confederation:  
The Spirit of Charlottetown

Notes for a Speech to the  
Committee of Confederation Centre

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Culture and Confederation: The Spirit of Charlottetown

In every country there are famous sites which cause a visitor to turn aside from his everyday concerns and to reflect on the events and personalities which have moulded his society. In many countries the most important of these are the great battlefields, palaces and temples. Canada's history has been too short to provide us with buildings that impress us by their age or size, and as for battlefields, if we exclude a few brief skirmishes and massacres, the list does not go much beyond Queenston Heights and the Plains of Abraham. Instead we must rely on reminders of less dramatic events: some traces of the explorers' routes and the early transportation systems which shaped our country, and the meeting places where its legal framework was devised. Of the latter, Charlottetown must have pride of place.

For it was here, during that memorable first week of September 1864, that the proposal for a confederation of British North American colonies was first put forward and accepted by delegates from Canada and the Maritime Provinces. Many of the principles discussed during that conference were included in the British North America Act of 1867 and still enjoy the support of most Canadians. The concept of a federal state with legislative powers divided between the central and local governments, as well as the nature of many of the powers to be exercised by the central government, were agreed to in Charlottetown. The need for French-speaking Canadians in Quebec to retain their educational system and civil law was recognized. All in all, if we could summon up the ghosts of the Fathers of Confederation, they would have reason to be proud of their handiwork.



Of course they could not have been expected to foresee the many radical changes which have affected our society and its governments over the last century and which are placing increasingly severe strains on the arrangements which they negotiated. I am sure they would understand why we are called upon, in our generation, to revise the constitution which they drafted, to repair some of its omissions, and to adapt it to our present needs.

How to do this is a matter of vital interest not only to politicians, editorial writers, constitutional lawyers and Royal Commissioners, but to all of us. That is why I believe that every Canadian who is concerned about the future of this country should be making a 'trip to Charlottetown' in his imagination, whether or not he can be here in person.

If a federation is to work it must protect the vital interests of its component parts. In Canada this is true for the vital interests of each province and region, and of both major language groups. Since our current crisis reaches its most acute expression among francophones in Quebec, let us consider their most vital interest and what steps should be taken to protect it. Fortunately this interest is easy to state, even if it has not been easy for some Canadians to understand or accept it. It is the survival and the well-being of the French language and culture.

Because the English language is not threatened with extinction in North America, it has been difficult for many members of the English speaking majority to sympathize with the intense feelings of French speakers on such questions as communications with aircraft and the language of work in Quebec. The independence movement has been well nourished by this inability, or unwillingness, to understand.

There has been very little comment in English Canada, for example, on the problem of French Canada's declining birth rate, although it is a matter of constant concern in Quebec. In that province, the leading demographers, who devote their lives to the study of this question, are accorded a celebrity status which, in English Canada, is reserved for economists immersed in private think tanks or sociologists who publish best-sellers. (And this despite the fact that demographers' predictions, in the past, have turned out to be even less reliable than those of astrologers, meteorologists or stock brokers.) The demographers' latest pronouncements are printed in headlines on the first page of newspapers and pored over in editorials, letters to the editors and the speeches of politicians. No less an authority than the Premier of the province, in an interview last year, expressed his belief that the rate would leap up as a result of the election of his government. Lack of francophone population growth has been a source of insecurity for Quebecers and has certainly contributed to the support for independence. So I can only hope that, on this issue, Premier Lévesque is right. If I were asked to stand on a balcony and shout out a slogan to the people of Quebec it would be: "Vive le Québec...libertin!"

Even if non-Quebeckers can have no direct effect on the birth rate in Quebec, they can support other measures which will help assure the survival of French language and culture.

There is no mention of culture in our constitution, although some ✓ who believe that it should be an exclusive provincial responsibility have argued that it falls within the definition of "education". It is true to say that "culture is a part of education" or, for that matter, that "education is a part of culture". Nevertheless, it would be difficult to maintain that the Fathers of Confederation intended to include all the activities which we describe as cultural within their somewhat narrow view



of education. The truth is that in 1867 culture as field of government responsibility was as unforeseeable as unemployment insurance, aviation or broadcasting.

The real question is not what might have been desirable in the 1860's, but what will be necessary in the 1980's. One requirement of a revised constitution will be a clear statement of the objectives of our federation, which must include the protection and support of French language and culture. I am aware that stating an objective does not guarantee its realization. But the inclusion of such a phrase in a revised constitution would be an indication that the Canadian majority has recognized the minority's vital interest in this matter, and would remove an ambiguity which is profoundly disturbing to every French-speaking Canadian.

✓ Because responsibility for the support of culture was not assigned to a single level of government, and because cultural activities affect so many aspects of our lives, both the federal and provincial governments have established cultural agencies and programs. To some the systems are complementary, to others redundant and wasteful, to others a threat to local or regional cultures. A candidate for the leadership of a provincial political party recently questioned the need for a federal grant to his city's symphony orchestra. A number of political figures from different parts of the country have suggested that constitutional reform should include a transfer of the federal government's responsibilities in this field (and the budgets for them) to the provinces. Although such proposals have far-reaching implications for artists and for all those interested in the arts, there has been very little informed public discussion of them.

Both the federal government and many provincial governments offer programs of assistance to individual artists. Although the Canada Council's ✓

program is the most comprehensive in the country we are often asked whether we are duplicating a service which could be better provided by the provinces. In reality there is an enormous variety among the various programs - in the disciplines covered, in the qualifications for eligibility, in the type of adjudication and in the standards applied by juries. As there are no absolute standards in judging an artist or his work, he may be refused support under one of these programs for any combination of aesthetic, political or financial reasons. Fortunately there are many examples of artists turned down by one jury and accepted by another. It is of fundamental importance that an artist should have a variety of possible sources of support. Any narrowing of the existing range of possibilities represents a serious threat to him and to the health of the arts. I would hope that artists themselves would be the first to recognize this and to speak out about it.

If individual artists require a variety of sources of support, how should arts organizations be funded? In the vocabulary of the Fathers are they "Matters of a merely local or private Nature in the Province" or are they "for the general Advantage of two or more Provinces"? Let us consider a few examples. The symphony orchestra whose federal grant was questioned by a provincial leadership candidate plays most of its concerts in its home city. But almost every season it is also called upon to tour in other provinces or in foreign countries. Naturally its home province is reluctant to support those performances which take place outside its own territory. When it is playing abroad there is no question that it is representing not merely its city and province, but Canada. If it is to attain and maintain a standard which will be a credit to Canadians, it requires a relatively high level of support not merely for the few concerts it gives abroad but throughout every season.



Or take the case of a dance company such as the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Only a small proportion of this company's performances can be given in Manitoba. Most of the time it is touring in other parts of Canada or abroad. Clearly it is providing a service to the whole country. It would be unrealistic, and unfair, to expect Manitoba to pay the entire cost of this company no matter where it is performing.

In the visual arts the Canada Council program which has aroused the most interest among provincial and foreign governments has been the Art Bank. The Bank has assembled a collection of contemporary Canadian works which is unequalled in its scope. Some provinces already have extensive art collections, and others may acquire them; but a provincial collection, or even a series of provincial collections, cannot provide the comprehensive overview of Canadian art which is found at the Art Bank.

Closer to home, consider the national tours of "Anne of Green Gables". If the Province of Prince Edward Island were required to pay the entire cost of these tours, they would never take place. Thousands of Canadians in other provinces would have no chance to enjoy one of our most enduring and endearing national treasures.

It is in the nature of cultural activities that some are merely of local interest, some of provincial or regional interest and some of national or international interest. There should be funding possibilities to correspond to each of these dimensions.

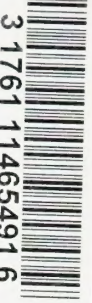
In saying this I do not wish to underemphasize the importance of the provincial role. In recent years most provinces have enlarged their cultural programs and I hope they will continue to do so. The stronger the provincial base, the less likely it is that the prospect of federal funding for interprovincial and international activities will

be perceived as a threat. Ideally, federal funding should be seen as an enlargement of opportunities both for the artists and the public in any province.

Of all our provinces it is Quebec which has the liveliest, most distinctive, and most deeply-rooted culture. Yet it is Quebecers, including many who are committed federalists, who most often express their concern about the federal role in culture. They must be reassured that their participation in a federation will not militate against the survival of Quebec's language and culture. On the contrary it will strengthen them, and enlarge the opportunities available to Quebec artists. For this purpose, it may be desirable in a revised constitution to assign to the provinces primary responsibility for the activities of cultural organizations which take place within provincial boundaries, while permitting the central government to assist those activities which go beyond provincial boundaries, or which relate directly to federal government responsibilities, such as international affairs.

To further complicate the picture, there are cultural activities which go beyond a single province but not beyond a region. For example there may be periodicals or publishing ventures, or theatre or music festivals, which serve the Maritime or Atlantic Provinces as a whole. It would be helpful to them if they could receive some form of joint provincial funding, rather than having to rely entirely on their home province. One solution might be a joint Maritime or Atlantic Provinces' cultural fund which could be administered by the provincial Premiers. In view of the growing interest in this part of the country in so many forms of artistic expression, I am sure that such a fund, even with a modest budget, could achieve results that would be of great value to the entire region.





Local needs, provincial and regional interests, national and international standards; somehow they must all be accommodated if we are to derive the greatest benefit from our human and material resources. What is needed is not a rigid structure, designed for uniformity, but a flexible framework which will encompass our diversities; not a revolutionary break with our past but a continuation and development of the best and truest Canadian tradition.

Reading over Donald Creighton's brilliant account of the Charlottetown Conference in The Road to Confederation, I was struck by his description of the two leading delegates, John A. Macdonald and George Etienne Cartier.

"Macdonald was the acknowledged advocate of the most strongly centralized federation that could be devised. Cartier, whose first and fundamental duty in political life was to defend the special institutions and distinctive culture of French Canada, stood out, in the eyes of the Maritimers, as a living guarantee that local loyalties and local administration must be permitted to survive."

As we prepare to carry on the work of these imaginative men, we should keep in mind the great principle which their partnership represented. Every province and every region of this country has its own contribution to make and it must be allowed the opportunity to make it: but together the whole can be worth far more than the sum of its parts.

It was the bright prospect of a new country built on this premise, combined with the lavish hospitality of their Island hosts, which caused euphoria to sweep through those 23 elated delegates in September 1864. Perhaps what we really need in 1978 is another conference in Charlottetown.

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